

Dog communication: Five things your dog may be saying to you and how you can use them to build a closer relationship with your dog

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Author: Fred M. Haney, Author of *My Doggie Says...Messages from Jamie: How a dog named Jamie 'talks' to her people*, author of the *My Doggie Says* blog and host of the *My Doggie Says Radio Talk Show*. www.mydoggiesays.com.

Are you sure you understand all of your dog's communications? What if your dog said something important and you didn't understand it? In order to improve your relationship with your dog, you need to make sure your dog communication skills are up to snuff.

Dogs communicate in different ways at different times. Sometimes they send messages in the very subtle ways that their ancestors used within wolf packs. At times, they use their voice to woof or bark. Other times, they use their tails, ears and posture to send messages. But many of their messages are simply sent by their actions. A dog's actions speak louder than words, or "barks."

In order to build strong relationships with our dogs, we need to understand what they are saying and, more important, to act on their messages. Here are five important messages your dog might be sending you and some suggested ways to respond in order to strengthen your relationship with your pet.

1. "Could we please play with this toy?" Dogs often initiate play by bringing a toy to their owner. It's tempting, when this happens, to immediately turn the game into a game of "fetch" by throwing the toy for the dog to retrieve. But why not see what your dog has in mind first? My Golden Retriever, Callie, loves to play a game called "let's just both hold this for a minute." She brings me one her favorite toys and pushes it toward my hand. If I try to take it, she resists. And if I just let her hold it in her muzzle, she keeps pushing it toward me. She's happiest when we're both just holding on.

This behavior can also turn into a game of tug-of-war, which raises an interesting question about "who's in charge." Most dog training teaches that the owner needs to be the "alpha" pack animal – or the animal in charge. The next conclusion is that it's not a good idea to play tug-of-war because it encourages aggression in your dog and reduces your "alpha" status.

But it can be good for a dog's psyche to "win" once in a while. Some trainers do advocate tug-of-war, so long as it doesn't over-reward aggression. Callie's game of "let's both hold this" is a good game, because it puts us on a level playing field for a short time.

2. “Could you please calm down?” You may be surprised how often your dog sends this message. And when you see it, it’s definitely a message you can act upon.

When dogs’ ancestors traveled in packs (wolf packs), they used a number of signals for keeping the peace within the pack. These “calming signals” are described in the book *On Talking Terms with Dogs: Calming Signals*, by Turid Rugaas. Some of the signals dogs use to reduce tension “within the pack” might surprise you. They can include licking their lips and simply yawning.

Next time you get impatient with your dog, or even just approach it head-on, check and see if it sends a “calming” message. Dogs don’t like tension, and they prefer to be approached indirectly, in a circular path. So if you walk straight toward your dog while making eye contact, you might get a “please calm down” message.

3. “I need a lot more exercise.” Dogs need a lot of exercise. After all, their ancestors spent their days running around the forest looking for food. How does a dog send this message? Too often, in unpleasant ways – by chewing on your furniture, eating your flowers, or digging holes in your back yard. The answer is simple: give your dog more exercise. This can be one of the benefits of dog ownership, as it can improve your health as well. My Golden Retriever, Callie, gets a three-mile jog almost every morning, and that’s usually enough to keep her calm for the rest of the day. But even after that, she sometimes gets restless in the afternoon.

4. “Help me do the things I was bred to do.” Most dogs, at least pure-bred dogs, were bred to do something specific – like hunt, retrieve, herd, (check AKC) or just to be snuggly. These instincts are an important part of a dog’s personality, so it’s important to nurture them. If you have a Golden Retriever, for example, it’s important to put it in situations where it can *retrieve* and maybe even better if you can give it opportunities to *swim and retrieve*. It might be a little more difficult to give your Australian Sheep Dog opportunities to herd sheep, but maybe you’ll understand if it tries to keep your friends together when you’re out hiking.

My previous Golden Retriever, Jamie, liked nothing better than to jump into Lake Arrowhead and retrieve her “floppy” (a floating Frisbee-like disc). And she looked forward to these times whenever we got close to the lake.

5. “Could we please play my favorite game?” This is one of my favorites. Again, it questions the “always alpha” rule, but it can give your dog an enormous boost in self confidence. The trick here is to observe your dog’s behavior and understand what it most likes to do. And to respond to its invitations.

When Callie came home for the first time, as an eight-week old puppy, she spotted an under-inflated soccer ball in our back yard. I don’t know where this came from, but she

ran to the other side of the ball and crouched down, making eye contact with me, as if to say, “OK, Fred, show me what you’ve got.” It was a clear invitation to play soccer with her. I gave the ball a kick, and, sure enough, she ran and trapped it under her little puppy tummy.

Today, fifteen months later, Callie and I still play soccer – at her invitation – almost every day. Our game has advanced. Now she jumps several feet in the air to “bonk” the ball off her nose or chest. And she tries to anticipate the direction of my kicks – to the extent that she can tell when I’m faking a kick. She just waits for the kick and then races to trap under her (now somewhat higher) puppy tummy. We play hard for about five minutes, and it’s an extremely rewarding, shared experience. And, best of all, it’s Callie’s creation.

“Listening” to your dog and acting on its requests can be extremely rewarding. Your dog can tell that you’re paying attention, and it will appreciate your efforts. The result can be that your dog is happier and better adjusted, and you have a much more interactive, mutually beneficial, relationship with it.

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